

Concerning

Women



A PUBLICATION FOR WOMEN VETERANS OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

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Visit us at www.charleston.va.gov

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a message from the

Program Manager

Dear Friends,

From preventing the flu to making it easier for veterans with ALS to receive compensation to easing mortgage issues, the VA is here to serve you.

It's time for flu shots again! Flu vaccines are available through your Primary Care Clinic, and no appointment is necessary. The flu vaccine is highly recommended for all ages.

The Secretary of the VA established ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), also called Lou Gehrig's disease, as a presumptive compensable illness, meaning the VA presumes a link between the disease and military service. A report titled "Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis in Veterans: Review of the Scientific Literature" analyzed numerous studies and concluded that "there is limited and suggestive evidence of an association between military service and later development of ALS." Veterans with this diagnosis should contact their VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000 to get information on applying for compensation.

VA is reaching out to veterans with mortgage problems with quick intervention through counseling and special financing arrangements. Call toll free 1-877-827-3702 for assistance.

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Charleston VA Quality Ranked #2 in Nation

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has surpassed 153 of the 155 VA's across the country, ranking #2 for quality of clinical care and #10 overall in the August 2008 release of metrics used to measure quality, patient satisfaction and access in the world's largest healthcare network.

On August 13, 2008, U.S. Senator Jim DeMint awarded the South Carolina On the Move award to John E. Barilich, director of the Charleston VAMC, and the VA staff.

Charleston's VA has realized a meteoric rise in the ranking since the end of fiscal year 2006 when it was ranked 79th overall in the country by expanding access to services and continuing to work with partners like Naval Health Clinic Charleston and Medical University of South Carolina to bring the latest medical treatments and technologies to veterans in the Lowcountry.

The VA's team approach means that each patient receives comprehensive care for all of his or her medical concerns at this tertiary care facility with a clear focus on prevention and improving clinical outcomes for better patient health.

The Charleston VA has a highly qualified team of specialists utilizing the latest technologies and treatment options to care



U.S. Senator Jim DeMint presented Charleston VAMC Director John Barilich the South Carolina On the Move award.

for our nation's heroes.

Recently expanded services include audiology at the Naval Health Clinic, TomoTherapy cancer treat-

ment through a sharing agreement with MUSC's Hollings Cancer Center, 24-hour emergency room services at the main campus hospital, tele-health services that bring help closer to home for veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental illnesses, and additional Seamless Transition Team staff to reach out to returning combat veterans.

"The truth is that the Charleston VA has always provided excellent medical care," said Barilich. "Now we're proving it through our performance measure results."

The Veterans Health Administration has stressed the importance of producing meaningful measures.

Information about stroke care, elder care, skin care, obesity, depression, PTSD, alcohol use, suicide and traumatic brain injury are being

collected in preparation for development of the 2009 performance measures. VHA currently has performance measures related to cancer care—including breast cancer and cervical cancer, hypertension, cardiovascular, pneumonia, diabetes, substance abuse, preventative measures, wait times, patient satisfaction, surgical care, tobacco use, resident supervision, immunizations, mental health and financial indexes.

Heart Disease - A Leading Cause of Death in Women

One in three American women dies of heart disease—making it the number one killer of women over 40 years of age, especially after menopause. After menopause, a woman's body makes less estrogen which increases her risk for heart disease. Coronary artery disease (CAD) is the most common form.

Coronary artery disease starts with a build-up of fatty deposits in the lining of the arteries supplying blood to the heart. Due to this process called atherosclerosis – the narrowed arteries cannot keep up a healthy flow of blood to the heart. As CAD worsens, heart function is increasingly affected, and the heart is damaged.

Many patients with CAD have few, if any, symptoms

until their heart function is seriously affected. Symptoms include chest pain, shortness of breath, weakness and fatigue, heart palpitations (a sensation of fluttering heartbeats), and lightheadedness.



CAD develops over time and can start as early as the teenage years. It's never too late to take steps against heart disease. By taking action, older women, and especially those who already have heart disease, can reduce their risk of developing heart-related problems.

Often making lifestyle changes is all that's needed. In fact, women can lower their heart disease risk by as much as 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

- **Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke.** About 22.6 million women smoke.
- **Lose weight.** About 62 percent of women are overweight.
- **Reduce high blood pressure.** About 25 percent of women have hypertension. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to heart failure. Medications can help control blood pressure.
- **Reduce high blood cholesterol.** Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like, waxy substance found in the bloodstream and in all of the body's cells. It's normal to have cholesterol, but too much can clog the arteries. Cholesterol comes from two sources: the body and food. Eat less saturated fat, trans fat, and other foods high in cholesterol. Medications to reduce cholesterol levels may also be prescribed.
- **Increase physical activity.** More women than men are physically inactive. More than 25 percent of women engage in no leisure-time physical activity, and more than 60 percent of women do not meet the recommended amount of at least

30 minutes a day of moderately intense physical activity such as brisk walking.

- **Manage diabetes.** Nearly 6 million women have been diagnosed with diabetes and another 2.8 million are undiagnosed. Medications and diet are important in managing this disease.

GETTING TREATMENT

- **Call 911.** Know heart attack signs and symptoms and call 911 immediately if the signs are present. Emergency medical service staff can begin treatment when they arrive – up to an hour sooner than if someone gets to the hospital by car. EMS personnel are trained to revive someone whose heart has stopped. Patients with chest pain who arrive by ambulance also usually receive faster treatment in the hospital.
- **Chest discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes

back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.

- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body.** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath** with or without chest discomfort.
- **Other signs** may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

VA *Concerning Women* is offered to provide health information. Medical advice should be obtained from your health care provider. If you would like to provide any suggestions or story ideas email us at vhachaconcerningwomen@va.gov or check out the latest news on our website www.charleston.va.gov. Questions or comments, please call (843) 789-7260. Editors: Bunny Mizzell and Heather Friesen



**National Wear Red Day
February 6, 2009**

Wear anything red - a red shirt, a red dress, a red hat, red shoes, or even red lipstick. It's a simple, yet powerful way to raise awareness of heart disease in women.

For more information, please go to www.goredforwomen.org

Record Numbers Helped at Stand Down Against Homelessness

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center helped record numbers of people in need – 1,915 total – during its ninth annual Stand Down Against Homelessness held in North Charleston, Oct. 30-31, 2008. Out of that number, 28 were women veterans. Each night more than 154,000 veterans in this country are homeless, approximately 3 percent of whom are women. In the Charleston

area, there are more than 5,000 homeless, and more women veterans are asking for assistance.

One woman veteran in particular, Leah Fennell, has asked for assistance and is now putting her life back together.

As the only U.S. Army woman serving at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, Fennell saw combat first-hand and was constantly on the move to stay safe. After nine months of constant change, Fennell returned home to face even more change. She found herself divorced and without her children.

Feeling alone and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Fennell turned to alcohol and drugs for help, eventually leaving her homeless.

The dangers of living on the streets prompted Fennell to ask for help through the VA.

Fennell joined the Substance Abuse Treatment Center program and the Compensated Work Therapy program at the Charleston VAMC. She is currently working at the medical



Stand Down 2008 helped a record 1,915 people in need.

center, and has been clean since January 2008.

“I feel like I would have wound up dead had I not received help from the VA,” said Fennell. “The Charleston VAMC, especially Director John Barilich, was instrumental in my recovery.”

“Stand Down is important because it gets this information out to those who need it,” said Fennell. “Learning about VA benefits, getting veteran ID cards, the medical help and clothing vouchers are all very beneficial.”

The clothing vouchers are especially important to Fennell because she can get clothes for work. Fennell is currently applying to the Charleston VAMC for a permanent position as well as applying to Trident Technical

College to get a degree to become a drug counselor.

“I want to give back to vets like me,” said Fennell. “I’ve been there and I can help them.”

“I like to say when I came to Charleston, I was homeless, childless, and jobless,” said Fennell. “I now can say I have my own two-bedroom apartment, I gave birth to a beautiful daughter in September, and I’m employed at the VA hospital and trying to obtain a permanent job.”

The Charleston VAMC homeless program provides health care, shelter, rehabilitation and employment assistance to more than 100 veterans each day. The VA is the only Federal agency that provides hands-on assistance directly to the homeless.



U.S. Army veteran Leah Fennell, once homeless, is reaching success with help from the VA.

The Valor of Women - *Women Awarded the Silver Star*

After a roadside bomb hit a Humvee convoy in Afghanistan in April 2007, 18-year-old Army Specialist Monica Lin Brown saved the lives of her fellow soldiers by using her body to shield them while rounds missed her by inches.

As a medic with the 82nd Airborne Division’s 782nd Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Team, Brown immediately grabbed her aid bag after the explosion and ran out into the gunfire to move and treat the wounded soldiers.

In March 2008, Brown became the first woman in Afghanistan and the second

woman since World War II to be awarded the Silver Star, the third highest military decoration given for valor in the face of the enemy.

Three years earlier in March 2005, Kentucky National Guard Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester of the 617th Military Police Company and her squad were following a supply convoy in Iraq when nearly 50 insurgents ambushed the convoy. The enemy outnumbered the squad five to one. After the squad flanked the enemy, Hester charged them with her rifle and grenades and eliminated three insurgents.

Hester was awarded the Silver Star for her courageous ac-

tions that day, making her the first woman since WWII to receive the distinguished honor.

The first female recipients of the Silver Star were four WWII nurses who successfully evacuated the 33rd Field Hospital in Italy in 1944.

Although women serving in the military today are not supposed to be in combat positions, this new war finds them in the middle of battles where they are expected to defend themselves and their team. They are rising to the occasion and demonstrating the unwavering valor of



Kentucky National Guard Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, Silver Star Recipient

Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll free **1-888-878-6884**

Telephone Advice Line

843-789-6400 or toll free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need medical advice from their Primary Care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment

843-789-6500 or toll free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all Primary Care Clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 extension 5220 or toll free at **1-888-878-6884 extension 5220**

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than healthcare)

1-800-827-1000

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions

1-866-258-2772

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

For more information on VA related topics visit www.charleston.va.gov.

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